

# Translation of the *Discorso o dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua*

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Angelo Codevilla, pointed out that translating a given work, particularly one which may be by Machiavelli, is potentially treacherous. Indeed, the *traduttore* (translator) can easily become a *traditore* (traitor) by the very act of translating<sup>1</sup>. Keeping this helpful and humbling anecdote in mind, the author, in this instance, the translator, strove to provide a new translation of the *Dialogo* without losing too much of its original feel.

Our translation is intentionally a little rough around the edges, in much the same way, we hope the reader will agree, the Italian is. This stands in contrast to the only other translation of the *Dialogo*, which was produced by John R. Hale in 1961<sup>2</sup>. Like all of his scholarship, that translation was thoughtful and elegant, though perhaps a little too much so concerning the latter. However, the author wishes to follow Hale's lead in one very important element; there are no arguments for or against Machiavelli's authorship of the work in the translation. On the contrary, the *Dialogo* is allowed to speak for itself.

## *A Discourse or Dialogue Concerning Our Language*

Whenever *I* have been able to honour *my* native country, even with *my* burden and peril *I* have done so voluntarily, because *a man* has no greater obligation in *his* life than that; first *they* depend on her for existence and then

for every other good thing that fortune and nature have given *us*<sup>3</sup>. They all were because of her; and so much greater is the obligation for those who have been given the noblest country. And truly he, who with his spirit and labor, makes himself an enemy of his native country, deservedly ought to be called a parricide; even though he may be acting out of some legitimate grievance. For if it is an evil deed to strike one's father or mother, whatever the reason, it follows out of necessity that striking one's country is a most infamous deed, because she is never the source of any persecution powerful enough to merit your insults. You must recognize that all good things come from her; such that if she strips herself of part of her citizens you are obligated even more so to thank her for those that she left than to slander her for those that she took (or exiled). And when this is true, that is most true, I shall never be wrong in defending her and warring against those who too presumptuously seek to deprive her of her honour.

The occasion which prompted this line of reasoning is the dispute, brought up repeatedly in the past days, as to whether the language in which our Florentine poets and orators have written is Florentine, Tuscan or Italian. In this dispute I have considered how some less dishonest persons want it to be called Tuscan, some others who are most dishonest call it Italian, and others hold that it should simply be called Florentine. And every one of them is strong to defend their part; so, with the brawl remaining indecisive, it occurred to me, in this *vendemmial* labor of mine, to write to you at length about that which I think, in order to end the question or give everyone material for greater argument.

Thus if we want to see with which idiom these writers (among whom Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio hold the highest place without any disagreement whatsoever) who are celebrated in this modern language, have written, it is necessary to put them in one place, and on the other all of Italy, to whose province (as a result of the love for the language of these three) it seems, every other region yields. For, in this regard, the Spanish and the French and the German are less presumptuous than the Lombard.

It is necessary, once this point has been made, to consider all of the Italian regions to see the difference in their speech and to give greater favor to those writers who agree more with these writers (i.e. Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio) and to grant them a higher degree and a greater place in the language that they utilize. And, if you agree, it is good to distinguish between all of Italy and the many castles and cities that are in her. However, wanting to escape this confusion, let us divide her only into her provinces such as Lombardy, Romagna, Tuscany, the Papal States and the Kingdom of Naples.

And truly, if each of these places are thoroughly examined one will see

great differences in their speech; and if one wants to know from whence this proceeds, it is necessary to examine first some of the reasons why there is so much similarity between them, that these writers today, think that those who wrote in the past employed a “common Italian language”; and why, amidst such diversity of language, we understand one another.

Some people want to believe that every language is determined by the affirmative particle which, subsequently, for all the Italians is signified with this word “*sì*,” and that one understands the same spoken language throughout that province where one affirms—or says yes—by saying the same word. They cite the authority of Dante, who, wanting to signify Italy, defined it with this particle “*sì*,” when he said:

*Ah Pisa, shame of the peoples  
of the beautiful land where the sì sounds*

that is Italy. They cite France as a further example, where the whole land is called France but the language is nevertheless divided into the regions of *ui* and of *oc*, which mean for them the same thing as *sì* for the Italians. As an additional example they put forward the whole German language, which says *iò* along with the entirety of England which says *jeh*. And perhaps motivated by these reasons many of them think that everyone in Italy who writes or speaks, does so according to only one language.

Some others hold that it is not the particle *sì* which defines the language, because, should *sì* determine it, the Sicilians and the Spanish might also be considered Italians as far as language is concerned. Therefore, it is necessary to define language with other arguments. They say that where one considers carefully the eight parts of speech into which every language is divided that you will find that the verb is the chain and nerve of the language, and that every time this part is consistent, even though the other parts might vary a great deal, it follows that the language must be mutually intelligible. Because the nouns that are unfamiliar to us are made understandable by the verb which is located between them, and thus, where the verbs are different, even though there are similarities among the nouns, it becomes another language. The province of Italy—whose differences among verbs is small, but among nouns most different—may be given as an example of this sort. For every Italian says *amare* (to love), *stare* (to be, etc.) and *leggere* (to read), but not everyone says *deschetto* (dressing table, work bench), *tavola* (table) and *guastada* (specifically shaped glass or bottle). Among the most important pronouns there are variations, as with *mi* in place of *io* and *ti* for *tu*. That which makes further differences among the dialects—but none so great that they are not mutually comprehensible—are the pronunciation and the

accents. The Tuscans end all their words with vowels, but the Lombards and the Romangols end almost all of them with consonants, as is *pane* (Tuscan—bread) and *pan* (Romagnol/Lombard—bread).

Once these, and all of the other differences in the Italian languages have been considered (if one wishes to see which of these takes the quill in hand and in which language the ancient writers have written) it is first necessary to see from whence Dante and the first writers came and whether or not they wrote in their native tongue. Then we will examine their writings and compare them with writings that are simply Florentine or Lombard or from another province of Italy—places where there is no art but only nature (or, it is not tempered with artifice but in its natural state); and that which is most consistent with their writings can be called, I believe, the language in which they wrote.

It is well-known from whence those first writers came (except a Bolognese, an Aretine and a Pistoiese, who among them did not piece ten poems together). They were Florentines; among whom, Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio take the prominent place, and such a high place, that others cannot hope to join them there. Among these authors, Boccaccio declared in the *Decameron* that he wrote in the Florentine dialect; I am not aware that Petrarch said anything about the matter; but Dante, in one of his books called the *De vulgari eloquio* (the *De vulgari eloquentia*), where he damned all of the particular languages of Italy, declared not to have written in Florentine, but in a curial language. In that manner, should one trust him, I would have to wipe out the arguments that I set forth above, in order to learn from their works, where they learned the language in which they wrote and spoke.

I do not want, as far as Petrarch and Boccaccio are concerned, to repeat myself yet again, because the latter is with us and the former is neutral, but I would rather dwell upon Dante, who in every aspect showed himself to be—by his genius, by his learning and by his judgment—an excellent man, except where he discussed his native country, which he persecuted beyond all humanity and philosophical foundation, and with every type of injury. And being unable to do anything other than defame her, he accused her of every vice, condemned her men, slandered her situation, spoke poorly of her customs and of her laws; and he did this, not only in one part of his *Cantica* (the *Commedia*), but in all of it—in various places and in diverse ways. He was injured by the offence of his exile so deeply, that he longed for revenge, and therefore he exacted as much revenge as he was able. And if, by chance, the bad things that he predicted had come about, Florence would have more to lament for having nurtured that man, than of any other calamity. But Fortune, in order to make lies of and to overshadow with its glory, his false slander, has continually favored her and made Florence famous throughout

the provinces of the world, and has brought her to the present in such happiness and so tranquil a state, that, if Dante were to see her, either he would accuse himself of the same crime once again, or beaten by the blows of his hateful envy, he would want, being newly resurrected, to die anew.

It is not, therefore, a marvel that this man, who in every way heaped infamy on his native country, wished once more with regard to language, to rob her of that reputation with which his writings had adorned her. And so as not to honor her in any way he wrote that work (*De vulgari eloquentia*) to demonstrate that the language in which he had written was not Florentine. Who, if he should be trusted, found Brutus in the deepest of Lucifer's throats, and five Florentine citizens among the thieves, and that his Cacciaguida should be found in Paradise and his similar passions and opinions; in those he made himself so blind, that he lost all of his dignity, learning, judgment, and he became another man altogether. To such an extent that, if he would have judged everything always in this way, either he would have continued to live in Florence or he would have been chased out like a lunatic.

But because things that are questioned with general words and conjectures may be easily criticized, I want, with vivid and true words, to demonstrate that his language is entirely Florentine and even more so than that which Boccaccio himself confesses to be Florentine—and in part I want to respond to those who hold the same opinion as Dante.

A common Italian language would be one where there was more of the common than of one's local language; and similarly one's local language would be that in which there is more of one's own than of any other language; because one will not be able to find a language that is complete unto itself without having borrowed from others. For, when men from varied provinces converse together, they borrow words one from the other. In addition to this, whenever time passes or new ideas or new arts come to a city it is necessary that new words come there also—words born in that language from whence those ideas or those arts have come; but accommodating themselves—in speech and moods and cases, with other differences and in the accents—they are made consistent with the words of that language that appropriates them, and so become its own. If this was not the case, languages would appear to be a patchwork and not well polished. Thus, foreign words are turned into Florentine, not Florentine into foreign words. Neither, therefore, can our language become anything other than Florentine.

And here it follows, that languages enrich themselves from the beginning, and become more beautiful as they become most copious; but is it very true that with time, through the multitude of these new words, they

are bastardized and become something different; but this happens over hundreds of years, which others do not perceive until it has descended into an extreme barbarism. This change is very quick when it happens that a new population comes to live in a province. In this case it makes its change in the course of an age of a man. But in whichever of these two ways the language is changed, it follows that if there is the will, the lost language can be regained by good writers who have written in that language, as has been done and is still being done with the Latin language and the Greek.

But leaving this part alone as not necessary, for our language is not yet in decline, and returning from whence I started, I say that that language ought to be called common to a province where the greatest part of its words, along with their uses, are not used in the other local dialects of that province; and a language can call itself local when the greater part of its words are not used in another language of that province.

As what I say is true—which is certainly most true—I would like to conjure Dante, so that he can show me his poem; and I will bring with me something which is written in the Florentine language. I will ask him what part of his poem was not written in Florentine. And he will respond that many words are non-Florentine, some were taken from Lombardy, some he made up himself and others taken from the Latin...

But because I would like to speak a little with Dante; in order to escape *he said* and *I responded*, I will put the speakers in front.

N. Which words did you drag in from Lombardy?

D. This:

*At the bridge-head (co del ponte) near Benevento*

and this also:

*With you will be born and will with you hide (vosco)*

N. Which did you borrow in from the Latins?

D. These, and many others:

*The passing beyond humanity may not be set forth in words.*

N. Which words did you create?

D. These:

*If I were in you, even as you are in me.*

These words, intermingled with Tuscan words, make a third language.

- N. That's good, but tell me: in your work, how many of these words are foreign or of your own making, or from Latin?
- D. In the first two *Canticles* there are only a few, but in the last, there are many—mostly derived from the Latins, because the varied ideas with which I reasoned, compelled me to use suitable words to express them; and this was not possible if I did not use Latin endings. So, I used them, but I changed them so that the endings became similar to the language of the rest of the work.
- N. In what language is the work written?
- D. Curial.
- N. What does curial mean?
- D. It means a language spoken by the courtesans at the Papal court, and at The Duke's (Milan), who, being learned men, speak better than those from particular regions of Italy.
- N. You will speak lies. Tell me something: what does "*morse*" (he bit) mean in that curial language?
- D. It means "*mori*" (he died).
- N. In Florentine what does it mean?
- D. It means "to squeeze with the teeth."
- N. When you said, in your verses:

*And when the teeth of the Lombard bit (morse).*

What does that *morse* (bit) mean?

- D. "Pricked," "offended" and "assaulted": that is a translation taken from the *mordere* (to bite) which the Florentines use.
- N. Therefore, you speak Florentine and not the courtly tongue.
- D. This is true for the most part; however, I am careful not to use certain words which are our own.
- N. How are you "careful"? When you say:

*He kicks (spingeva) violently with both feet.*

This *spingere*, (to kick) what does it mean?

- D. In Florence it means, when an animal kicks with its feet, "it jumps with a couple of kicks"; because I wanted to show how he was kicking his feet, I said, "he kicks" (*spingeva*).
- N. Again, tell me: wanting to say "legs," (*gambe*)

*And he who kicks hard with the legs (zanche)*

Why did you say that?

- D. Because in Florence they call those stilts “legs” (*zanche*) on which the spirits go about for Saint John’s Day, and because they use them as legs (*gambe*), I wanted to signify *gambe*, so I said *zanche*<sup>4</sup>.
- N. By my faith you do guard yourself well against Florentine words! But tell me when you say later on:

*Do not take, mortals, vows too lightly (ciancie),*

why do you say “lightly” (*ciancie*) like the Florentines and not “lightly” (*zanze*) like the Lombards, as you have said *vosco* and *co del ponte*?

- D. I did not say *zanze* to avoid using a barbarous word like that; but I said *co* and *vosco*, either, because they are not such barbarous words, or, because in a lengthy work it is permissible to use some foreign words, as Virgil did when he said:

*The waves and the treasures of Troy.*

- N. That is fine; but did Virgil not write in Latin for this reason?
- D. No.
- N. And so you have not left your native language just because you have said *co* and *vosco*. But we are having a vain dispute, because in your work, in many places, you confess that you speak both Tuscan and Florentine. Do you not say of one that heard you speaking in the Inferno:

*And he that understood the Tuscan speech.*

And in another place, Farinata is heard speaking to you:

*Your way of speaking has made manifest  
That you are a native of the country  
Against which, perhaps, I made too many attacks.*

- D. It is true that I said all of these things.
- N. Why then do you say that you do not speak Florentine? But I want to convince you with books in hand and by comparisons



between them; and therefore we shall read your work and the *Morgante*. Read on (in your work).

- D. *In the middle of our life's walk  
I discovered myself in a dark wood  
Where the straight way was lost.*

N. That is sufficient. Read a little, now, of the *Morgante*

D. Where?

N. Wherever you want. Read here or there.

D. Here:

*He who (chi) begins has not merit yet, it is written  
In your holy Gospel, good Father.*

N. Well now, what difference is there between your language and this?

D. Little.

N. I do not think there is any.

D. Here there is one thing that I do not understand.

N. What?

D. That *chi* is too Florentine.

N. You will have to retract that: or did you not say

*I do not know who (chi) you are, or by what means  
You have come down here,  
but (you do seem to me) Florentine..?*

D. It is all true and I am wrong.

N. My Dante, I hope that you will amend your ways, and that you will consider better the Florentine idiom and your work, and that you will see that if anybody is to feel shame, Florence will know it better than you; because, if you will consider carefully that which you have said, you will see that in your own verses you have not escaped awkwardness, as in:

*Then we left...and we went on a while;*

You have not escaped filthy words, like this:

*That makes shit of that which is eaten;*

You have not escaped obscenity, such as:

*He raised his hands with both the figs.*

And not having fled this type of writing that dishonors all of your work, you cannot have escaped an infinite number of local words that are not used anywhere other than Florence; because art can never be completely contrary to nature.

Besides this, I want you to consider that languages cannot be simple, and that it is better that they are mixed with other languages. But a native language (such as Florentine), converts words that it has borrowed from others into its own use, and it is so powerful, that the borrowed words do not disorder it, but rather, it disorders theirs; because that which it bears from the others it pulls to itself in such a manner, that it seems to be its own.

And these men who write in such a language, like her lovers, are bound to do that which you have done, but not to say that which you have said; because if you have borrowed many words from the Latins and from foreigners, if you have made new words, you have done very well; but you have done badly to say that for this reason that which you wrote has become another language. Horace says:

*When the language of Cato and Ennius  
had enriched the speech of their native country;*

and he lauds these as the first who began to adorn the Latin language.

In their armies, the ancient Romans did not have more than 2 legions of native Romans—these totaled roughly 12,000 persons, and then they had 20,000 from other nations. Nevertheless, because the native Romans were, along with their captains, the nerve of the army, they all fought according to Roman order and discipline. Indeed, these armies retained the name (that is Roman), and the authority along with Roman dignity. And you, Dante, who have put in your writings twenty legions of Florentine words and used cases, tenses and moods and Florentine endings, want these foreign words to change the language?

And if you called it the common Italian or courtly language, because in such a language, one uses all the verbs that are used in Florence, I respond to you, that even if the same verbs have been used, they do not use the same nouns, because they change so much with pronunciation, that they become another thing. Because you know that foreigners pervert the *c* so that it becomes *z*, like those discussed above, *cianciare* and *zanzare*, or they add

letters, like *verrà* which becomes *vegnirà*, or they take them away, like *poltrone* and *poltron*; so much so that these words, which are similar to ours, are bungled so, that they turn them into something else.

And if, while speaking with me, you continue to press for the courtly language, I respond to you, that if you speak of the courts of Milan or Naples that they mirror the locale of their native countries, and those are best that come nearest to Tuscan and imitate it most. And if you want that which imitates to be better than that which is imitated, you wish for something that is almost never the case. But if you speak of the court of Rome, you speak of a place where people speak in as many ways as there are nations there, and it is not possible to provide any rule. Then I marvel that you want, where nothing praiseworthy or good is done, to do this (to elevate this court to such a high place of esteem); because where there are perverse customs it necessarily follows that the language must also be perverse; for it reflects the effeminate lasciviousness of those who speak it.

But that which deceives many regarding shared or common words is this, (you and the other writers, having been celebrated and having been read in various places) many of our words were learned by many foreigners and used by them, so that from our own they became common property. And if you want to prove this, simply bring forward a book composed by one of those foreigners who wrote after you, and you will see how many words of yours they use, and how they seek to imitate you. And to have evidence of this, make them read books written by their fellow citizens before you were born and they will see, that in these books none of our words, nor any of our terms are found. And so it appears that the language in which they write is yours, and it is due to you, and yours is not common to theirs. If you read their writing you will see, although they try to imitate your language with continual effort, that in a thousand places it is badly and perversely used—because it is impossible that art should be mightier than nature.

Consider yet another thing, if you want to see the dignity of your native tongue; when these foreign writers entertain a new subject, if they do not have an example of words learned from you, out of necessity, they must scurry back to the Tuscan. Or, if they use their own native words, they smooth them out and change them according to the Tuscan usage. Otherwise neither they nor other persons would approve of it.

And as a result, they say that all of the native languages are ugly unless they have been mixed, so that none need be brutish. But, I say furthermore, that the language which has to be mixed the least is the most praiseworthy—and without a doubt the one which has the least need of admixture is Florentine.

I say once again that since many things are written, which are written

without words and expressions from their own native tongues, they cannot be beautiful. An example of this sort are comedies; because, although the end of a comedy is to raise a mirror to private life, nevertheless, the way in which it does this is with a certain urbanity and with expressions that move people to laughter so that men, racing to this delight, taste afterwards the useful example that is implied. Consequently the characters who are serious are difficult to deal with; because there can be no gravity in a fraudulent servant, in a lecherous old man, in a young man made insane by love, in a flattering whore, in a greedy parasite; but good comes from comic compositions for they produce men who are gravely effected along with other uses for our daily lives. But because these things are dealt with ridiculously, it is necessary to use terms and words that bring about these effects; if these sayings and expressions are not derived from their own local or native words, where they are popular and well-known, they do not move nor can ever combine to produce these desired effects.

Therefore, one who is born as a non-Tuscan can never play this part well, because if he wants to use jests from his native country he will make a patchwork garment. Indeed, he will make a composition half-Tuscan and half-foreign; and this will illustrate which language he has used, and whether it is communal or his own local language. And if he does not want to use them, not knowing the Tuscan, he will produce a work which is lacking—far from possessing perfection.

And to prove this I would have you read a comedy written by one of the Ariosti from Ferrara. You will find a refined composition, well ordered with an ornate style; you will see a tightly woven knot (plot or intrigue) well adjusted and even better loosened (plot resolution); but you will see it stripped of those salts that such a comedy requires, for no other reason than that stated before. He did not like the Ferrarese words and he did not know the Florentine words, so he left them out. He used one common word, and I also believe that it was made common by way of Florence, saying that a doctor of theology would pay one of his women in *doppioni*. Then, he used one of his own local words, which proves how bad it is to mingle the Ferrarese with the Tuscan; one of Ariosto's characters, saying that she did not want to speak where there were ears that could hear her, is made to respond that she would not speak where there were *bigonzoni*. And, a refined palate knows how offensive *bigonzoni* is both when read and when heard. And you can easily see here and in many other places with what difficulty he maintained the decorum of the language that he had borrowed.

Consequently, I conclude that there are many things that cannot be written well without understanding the local and particular elements of that language, which is most highly regarded (i.e. Florentine); and wanting to use

local words one should go to the source—the place from whence the language has its origin. Otherwise you will make a work where one part does not correspond to the other.

And the importance of this language in which you, Dante, wrote—the same language that the others who came before and after you have written—owes its preeminence to Florence. This is demonstrated by the fact that you were Florentine, born into a native country that spoke in such a way, that it was able to accommodate better than any other, writing in verse and in prose—which is not possible with the other languages of Italy. Everyone knows that the Provençaux were the first to write in verse; from Provence the use of verse traveled to Sicily, and from Sicily to Italy; and from among the provinces of Italy to Tuscany; and from all of Tuscany to Florence, for no other reason than its language was most suited to it. Florence did not merit being the first to beget these writers as a result of the comfort of her situation, or for the genius of her people, or for any other particular occasion, but her language was best accommodated—before that of any other city—to take on the discipline of writing in verse.

One sees in these times that this is true, in that there are many Ferrarese, Neapolitans, Vicentines and Venetians who write well and who possess the ingenious capacities necessary to be a writer. This could not have happened before you, Petrarch and Boccaccio had written. For, wanting to reach this place of esteem, but being hindered by their native tongue, it was necessary that first, one should come to teach them by his example—to teach them how to forget the natural barbarism in which their native tongues drowned them.

I will conclude, therefore that there is no language, which can be called common to Italy or a courtly tongue, because all those that might be called thus, have their foundation in Florentine writers and their language. To whom, as their true fount and their foundation, foreign writers must apply for all of their deficiencies. And not wanting to be truly stubborn, they have to confess that Florentine is their source and foundation.

After Dante listened to these things he confessed that I was correct and he departed. I remained, completely contented with myself at having undeceived him. But, I do not know whether I will undeceive those who are so little learned of the benefits that they have themselves received from our native country, that they wish to unite her with the Milanese language, Venice, Romagna, and all the blasphemies of Lombardy.

1. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Angelo M. Codevilla (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xix.
2. Niccolò Machiavelli, the “Dialogue concerning our language” in, *The Literary Works of Machiavelli* trans. John R. Hale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961). The author owes a great debt to the late John Hale. For, it was his translation of the *Dialogo*, that first caught our attention and sparked our interest in this overlooked treatise.
3. The reader will find the various pronouns in the opening sentence of the *Dialogo* highlighted. When translating this important opening paragraph, one could have changed the pronouns so that it read more consistently. However, this would have undermined the universal obligation to the *patria*, which the *Dialogo*’s author attempted to convey. This important point was highlighted by Barbara Godorecci in *After Machiavelli: “Re-writing” and the “Hermeneutic Attitude”* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993), 68–69.
4. The author of the *Dialogo* catches Dante red-handed, using the Florentine *zanche* rather than the non-Florentine *gambe*.